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# “Thinking the World Politically”

An interview with Chantal Mouffe

*Martin Oppelt\**

**Oppelt:** Just some months ago, you published a book called “Agonistics. Thinking the World Politically”. Would you tell us something about the composition of the book? What is the idea behind it, which objectives did you pursue, and how does it integrate into the broader context of your work?

**Mouffe:** Well, first of all, it is a collection of talks that I gave over the last years and that have been rewritten to give them more coherence. All talks had to do with the development of my “agonistic model” of politics and the objective was to present my agonistic approach to different audiences and to envisage its relevance in different fields.

In the first chapter, I draw the main lines of my agonistic approach and distinguish my perspective from that of other agonistic theories because I am, of course, neither the only nor the first to speak about agonism. There are others, for instance, Bonnie Honig or William Connolly, who are influenced by Hannah Arendt or Nietzsche. I, therefore, thought that it might be important to clarify my personal view. I argue that in Honig’s and Connolly’s conceptions, the main dimensions for politics – antagonism and hegemony – are missing. They both fight against closure, but they both ignore the nature of the hegemonic struggle. In the end, both celebrate a politics of disturbance, but ignore the important question of establishing the chains of equivalence among democratic demands and constructing a counter-hegemony. Bonnie Honig is right in insisting on the importance of agonistic disputes, but in her conception, the nature of the agonistic struggle does not seem to be more than an ongoing contestation over issues or identities. However, it is not enough to challenge what exists – the creation of new articulations and institutions should also be considered. William Connolly, who is influenced by Nietzsche, tries to link the Nietzschean “agon” to democratic politics and promotes the political virtue of “agonistic respect” emerging from the shared existential condition of the struggle for identity. But in my view, he doesn’t address the important political question which concerns the limits of agonistic respect. Consequently, his conception remains at the level of an “ethos of pluralism”. I emphasize the difference between ethical and political perspectives as well as

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the necessity for agonistic theorists to acknowledge the link between agonism and antagonism instead of postulating the possibility of an “agonism without antagonism”. This is, I claim, the problem with Hannah Arendt because her idea of plurality never acknowledges that this plurality is at the origin of antagonistic conflicts. That’s why in the end her pluralism is, in my view, not fundamentally different from that of Habermas. Despite significant differences between their conceptions, both are convinced that you can reach consensus in the public space, and they do not see that every consensus is hegemonic.

There is a chapter about the relevance of the agonistic approach for international relations and about democracy in a multipolar world. I argue in favor of a multipolar world and of envisaging the world as a pluriverse. In addition to my criticism of classical cosmopolitan conceptions in *On the Political*, in which I refer to Daniele Archibugi and David Held, in *Agonistics* I expand this discussion to the new cosmopolitan conceptions. I also discuss whether a non-Western, non-secular form of democracy is conceivable. With respect to human rights, I scrutinize the Western interpretation which is currently dominant, and I ask if this individualistic interpretation must be seen as a necessary condition for democracy.

Another chapter outlines the relevance of my agonistic approach for the question of European integration. I suggest that the European Union should be conceived of as a “demoi-cracy”, which is composed of many different demoi. Moreover, I insist on the need to offer an alternative to neo-liberal politics, which, in my view, is at the origin of the current disaffection with the European project.

In the fourth chapter, I contrast two models of radical politics. On the one hand, there is the strategy of a politics of “withdrawal from” as proposed by Hardt and Negri, who call for an exodus from the state and from traditional political institutions and for a rejection of representative democracy. On the other hand, there is my model of a politics of “engagement with” which aims at critically engaging with existing institutions in order to profoundly transform them.

The last chapter deals with cultural and artistic practices and discusses what role they could play in politics and in the hegemonic struggle. Taking my bearings from Gramsci, I assert the central place occupied by the cultural domain is the construction of “common sense” and its importance in fostering counter-hegemonic practices.

In the conclusion, I examine current protest movements in the light of the aforementioned ‘exodus’ and agonistic models of radical politics. I propose to see those movements as an expression of the lack of agonistic politics in liberal democracies and I contend they should be interpreted as a call for a radicalization of liberal democratic institutions and not for their rejection.

I take issue with protest movements such as the *Indignados* of the M 15 and the *Occupy* movement, which advocate non-representative forms of democracy and claim that representative democracy is an oxymoron. I argue that one cannot imagine democracy without representation. That’s the deep conviction that I have acquired over the past years, and I really want to develop this thought further because I think that under the present circumstances, this is a very strategic issue. Is representative democracy something that needs to be replaced by non-representative forms, or is our current predicament due to the shortcomings of “really existing representative democracy”? Do we have to transform and deepen the forms of representation we have, or should we relinquish them altogether? These are the topics that I am interested in at the moment.

**Oppelt:** Your claim that a recognition of antagonism and hegemony as key concepts for a proper understanding of the nature of the political requires the acknowledgement of the lack of a final ground and the undecidability that pervades every social order. In addition, you say that there can't be democracy without representation. Those assumptions remind me of Claude Lefort, who is perceived as one of the most important and influential thinkers in the discourse of radical democracy. How important was Lefort for you and for the "radical democracy"? What do you and other radical democrats owe Lefort?

**Mouffe:** First of all, I would like to dispel a frequent confusion and spell out the difference between radical democracy and the agonistic model of democracy. Those two terms cannot be used indistinctively, as it is sometimes the case, because they refer to different aspects of my reflection. Radical democracy, as it is clearly a political project, is to be distinguished from other political projects, like the social democratic or the neo-liberal ones. The agonistic model of democracy, however, is something different. It is an analytical approach, formulated as an alternative to the aggregative and deliberative models, and it does not have a specific political content.

With respect to radical democracy you also have to be careful when using the term undifferentiatedly. Even Habermas talks about "radical democracy", so the term itself doesn't say much about what is understood by it. In order to answer your question concerning Lefort, I would say that the way thinkers in the United States or Germany, for example, talk about radical democracy is – as far as I can see – not influenced by Lefort. I don't think that Lefort had a particularly big influence on their conception of radical democracy. For me, Lefort was an important point of reference at a certain time, but of course, there are differences between Lefort's thinking and mine. Particularly interesting for me was the debate between Lefort and Castoriadis. I was originally more influenced by Castoriadis because I come from a Marxist tradition following Althusser and Gramsci. You could say from a kind of a heterodox form of Marxism. Reading Castoriadis was important for me in terms of starting to see things differently, and I knew his work before Lefort's. I then got to know Lefort very well personally and started studying his work. I soon became convinced that, in the debate between him and Castoriadis on the question of democracy, I agreed more with Lefort. Castoriadis, in fact, believed that there is only one form of democracy – the ancient Greek version of "direct democracy". For Lefort, there is a big difference between this kind of democracy and what is usually called "modern democracy", the form of democracy that arose from what he called the "democratic revolution" in reference to Tocqueville. By the way, I have used this term "modern democracy" as well, but I recently started trying to avoid it because I realized that it implied that with the Western form of liberal democracy, we have reached a more advanced democracy in terms of rationality or morality. Consequently, the Western model can easily be presented as being the only legitimate model, the model that needs to be implemented universally, a position that I reject. I agree with Lefort in that the distinction between "ancient" and "modern democracy" is important in the Western context, and that we are dealing with two different forms of symbolic order. But I do not believe that the Western model should be universalized and that democratization requires westernization.

I would like to stress that Lefort didn't like the term 'radical democracy'. When he read *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, he commented on our choice of that term in a critical way and he never used it himself. At the very beginning, he used the term 'savage democracy', which was later developed by Miguel Abensour and which, of course, is taken

from Marx. But from a certain point on, Lefort concentrated more on defending representative democracy as the modern form of democracy. As far as I am concerned, I want to emphasize the necessity in the West of radicalizing this ‘modern’ form of democracy, and this is, in fact, what we understand by radical democracy, a radicalization of liberal pluralist democracy. What we favour is a critique of liberal democracy that does not aim at erasing the existing forms in order to create something completely new. There are enough suitable symbolic resources inside liberal democracy to criticize and radicalize this model. If we take liberty and equality for all to constitute what I call the “ethico-political principles” of liberal democracy, we can’t imagine more radical principles. What we should do is to force Western societies to put these principles into practice, extending them to increasingly more social relations. So from that point of view, “radicalization” does not require a total break with liberal democracy. What we, of course, criticize is the identification of “liberal democracy” with “capitalist democracy” and we understand it in terms of a political regime. By ‘liberal democracy’ we mean the articulation of the democratic tradition of equality and popular sovereignty with the liberal tradition of the rule of law and the separation of powers. This is an articulation that radical democracy would not destroy but it would give prominence to the democratic tradition over the liberal one.

**Oppelt:** Your criticism of liberalism is strongly influenced by Carl Schmitt, whose work – that you once designated as a “real challenge” for you – is currently widely discussed. As a German, I am particularly interested in the reaction within the Left at the time of the beginning of your discussion of Schmitt, who, as you might know, is called the “Crown Jurist of the Third Reich”. To what extent has your discussion of Schmitt been a challenge for the Left?

**Mouffe:** Well, that highly depended on the countries and their specific political and academic culture. I know, of course, that you Germans had and may even still have problems with the very name of Schmitt, which was almost a taboo for a long time. But in Italy, where I started to study Schmitt, things were different. I actually read most of Schmitt’s writings in Italian before I was later able to read them in German. In the 70s, the Italian Left discovered Schmitt, and a very interesting publication of the *Concept of the Political* with a new introduction by Schmitt was published. There were a lot of conferences about Schmitt at that time, and many of the most important Italian political theorists referred to Schmitt, so there wasn’t a problem at all. In France, however, he was not so well known. Raymond Aron had indeed published the *Concept of the Political*, and there were a few people who discussed his work, among them Jean-Francois Kervégan and Julien Freund. There was not much hostility, but there was also no extended discussion. In Great Britain, he was almost unknown. It’s really interesting how the situation with respect to Schmitt has changed. Today, it seems to me that he is even kind of fashionable. This might have to do with the influence of Agamben, and I sometimes have the feeling that people want to show that they are up to date and, for that reason, make references to Schmitt. So many people have begun to quote Schmitt or refer to his work, that it is really a bit too much.

**Oppelt:** What surprises me is that in your discussion of Schmitt and of his criticism of liberalism and parliamentarianism, you don’t mention Rousseau at all even though Schmitt strongly refers to him. Why is that?

**Mouffe:** Well, that’s quite easy. Schmitt tends to agree with Rousseau, and I don’t. I know, of course, that there is a lot of discussion about the proper understanding of Rous-

seau's writings. Some say he's liberal, and some say (with good reason) that he's republican. For others, he's the forefather of totalitarianism. For me, Rousseau was not really important. I would like to clarify by the way, that my relation to Schmitt is a very adversarial one. He's absolutely right in that you can't imagine a society completely beyond antagonism. But starting from the Schmittian premises – especially his understanding of the political as the friend-enemy distinction –, I aim at showing the possibility of a pluralist liberal democracy. The problem that I have with Schmitt is, of course, his rejection of the articulation of liberalism and democracy, his claim that liberal democracy is an oxymoron. In this point, he paradoxically agrees with all those Leftists who today reject "representative democracy". Schmitt is also right when he insists that the idea of representation is not one that comes from the democratic tradition but one arising from the liberal tradition. But for me, it is precisely this articulation between the liberal and the democratic political logics that guarantees pluralism and that the rights of minorities are taken into account. In fact, I prefer the term "pluralist democracy" to "liberal democratic society" because what liberalism added to the democratic tradition was exactly the recognition of pluralism. In this sense, the liberal tradition has enriched the democratic tradition. You can clearly retrace this in the work of John Stuart Mill, which introduced the need to respect minorities and the principle of liberty. Any form of majoritarian democracy could open the way towards totalitarianism. In fact, Schmitt himself says that Fascism and Nazism are necessarily anti-liberal but not necessarily anti-democratic – and in a certain sense, that is true.

I must confess that I was much more anti-liberal before reading Schmitt, and paradoxically, I began to appreciate the strength of the liberal tradition through his work. While studying his writings, I became aware of the danger of animosity towards liberalism and realized what the liberal tradition contributed to the democratic tradition. So I don't agree with Schmitt when he claims that there is a contradiction between liberalism and democracy. But on the other side, I also don't agree with Habermas who says that there is a co-originality between the principles of liberty of liberalism and equality of democracy. Schmitt is right to say that those two political logics are ultimately irreconcilable. You can't have perfect equality and perfect liberty together. But contrary to Schmitt, I see this relation more as a tension than as a contradiction. I think it is necessary to acknowledge the way in which democracy became liberalized and liberalism democratized as C.B. McPherson showed. What is important to see is that there is always a hegemonic struggle between the logics of equality and liberty. One of these logics always tends to become the dominant one. The story of liberal democracy is the story of the conflict between those logics, a conflict between those who want to see the liberal principle become the dominant one and those who want to see the democratic principle to do so. It's the possibility for both principles to struggle for hegemony which can be seen as the condition for an agonistic struggle. In our present situation, the problem is that the liberal side understood in neo-liberal terms has become so hegemonic that everything that has to do with the democratic tradition is discarded and seen as obsolete. That is really a huge problem because it is very important to maintain the tension. When one speaks about "post-democracy" – and I do agree that our societies can, in fact, be called "post-democratic" – it is because the democratic has been totally displaced by the dominance of the liberal one.

**Oppelt:** As for Rousseau, Schmitt and Lefort, Machiavelli is an important point of reference for you. As Machiavelli did, you understand the presence of antagonism as an ine-

radicable source of society, and so did Schmitt, Lefort and – at least some would say – Rousseau. Leaving Schmitt aside, the previously mentioned thinkers are “Republicans”. How would you arrange your thinking within the tradition of republicanism, and which connection is there between the discourse of republicanism and the discourse of radical democracy?

**Mouffe:** That depends on which form of republicanism you are referring to. In my view, Schmitt is right to say that political theory needs to start with a conception of “man as a dangerous being” and with what is sometimes seen as a pessimistic philosophical anthropology, although it would be more appropriate to speak of a realist one. With respect to Machiavelli, he is definitely an important point of reference for me. Of course, everything depends on how you read him, that is to say, whether you read his work from a Straussian perspective or not. I like Quentin Skinner’s reading of Machiavelli very much and, of course, Lefort’s as well. They insist that in the *Discorsi* you find a defense of republicanism. In the debate between the “liberals” and the “civic republicans”, I definitely find myself on the side of the “civic republicans”. But I don’t think that both should be presented as two antagonistic positions because there are many different possible forms of liberalism. That was something that Claude Lefort was interested in, although he never developed it. He was interested in working on the tradition of “civic republicanism” and in showing how far it was compatible with the liberal tradition.

One could say that an important question today is how to bring together these two traditions and develop a “civic republican form of liberalism” that would introduce elements of civic republicanism into the liberal tradition. Indeed, if we envisage radical democracy in terms of radicalization of liberal democracy, a lot of insights from civic republicanism could play an important role in this process.

**Oppelt:** As republican and liberal theories strongly disagree in their assumptions or conceptions of the subject, could you specify your own approach to this question?

**Mouffe:** I agree with the Freudian thesis developed by Lacan that the place of the subject is the place of a lack and that there is no essential identity but only forms of identification. A ‘subject’ is the result of different forms of identification. And identification always takes place in a context where there is power and hegemony and the ‘subject’ is always constituted through its insertion in practices. We do not, as in the liberal view, have an already constituted subject that would later enter into different practices. This anti-essentialist perspective is very important for politics because it permits understanding how identities are constituted and how they can be transformed. Freud pointed to the importance of affective libidinal bonds in the process of collective identification, and this is a crucial insight for envisaging an agonistic politics.

**Oppelt:** So from the point of view of your own philosophical anthropology, you would position yourself closer to Freud than, let’s say, to Foucault?

**Mouffe:** My philosophical anthropology is definitely influenced by Freud and the concepts of Eros and Thanatos. For Freud, ‘Eros’ is the power that holds together everything in the world, and ‘Thanatos’ refers to the instinct of aggressiveness, which is inherent to all human beings. I think the death drive and the Eros are linked to the human condition.

In Elias Canetti’s *Masse und Macht*, you find the idea that human individuals are moved by two main drives, one towards individuality and one towards the mass. We all

want to be singular individuals and – at the same time – be part of the mass or part of a collective “we”. I also find this vision quite useful to grasp the dynamics of mass political movements.

**Oppelt:** When talking about your project of “radical democracy” and your theoretical influences, what exactly is, in this respect, the importance of being “Post-Marxist” today? Is Marx still an important reference for you, and if yes, in what sense?

**Mouffe:** First of all, “Post-Marxist” is a term that we neither coined nor chose as we already made clear in the introduction to the second edition of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. It is a label that people attributed to us, and we somehow accepted it, provided that ‘Post-Marxist’ does not mean ‘Anti-Marxist’, that it’s not a general rejection of Marxism. What we were saying – and still say – is that it’s absurd to treat Marx as an endpoint. A living theory needs to develop; you can’t say that everything was given in Marx. We were – and are – convinced that a critical relation with the Marxist tradition was needed, and that some insights of Marxism are important. On the other hand, we didn’t want to stop there. So we developed some insights and discarded others. I am not constantly wondering whether my developments are compatible with Marx or not. Marxism was a certain and definitely important moment in my intellectual trajectory, but it is not an ‘identity’ that I would assume. There are a lot of people who are “rethinking Marxism” and who really want to inscribe themselves exclusively into that tradition, but that is not my position. For me, to sum it up, Marx is just one of many authors who have influenced my thinking.

**Oppelt:** You said that you owe Schmitt your understanding of “the political” contrary to “politics”. This distinction is currently also a matter of a widespread discussion among many theorists coming from different traditions. How important do you consider this debate about the relationship between “the political” and “politics” and in what respect?

**Mouffe:** The problem is that this distinction is made in so many ways by very different thinkers that the situation is sometimes really confusing. For French thinkers like Rancière or Badiou, “la politique” (politics) is the important or emancipatory moment. Badiou, for example, reserves “le politique” (the political) for a critique of traditional political philosophy, while “la politique” (politics) designates his own position. For him, “politics” is the order of truth and the event. He strongly insists that for the event to occur, it is necessary to leave aside all facts and to be faithful to something which is not a given act of reality. Rancière, on the other hand, uses the term “police” instead of ‘le politique’ in contrast to “la politique” and for him, “police” is the less valuable dimension. For Lefort or Sheldon Wolin, “la politique” means the politics of the politicians, which for them is not that interesting and ‘the political’ (le politique) is the noble dimension. For my part, ‘the political’ refers to the dimension of antagonism, to the presence of radical negativity. And ‘politics’ is the ensemble of practices, institutions, and language games through which human coexistence is organized. So “the political” has to do with the ontological level, and “politics” is situated on the ontic level. You never encounter “the political”; it only expresses itself under forms of politics, so you can’t prefer one level to the other – you can’t think of a high and a low level. Those who see “la politique” as the high moment usually believe that it refers only to the emancipatory dimension, and I don’t agree with that. There are also forms of politics that are not emancipatory. Where the distinction between the political and politics might be useful, despite the possible con-



fusion, is that it helps us to discern the language game of political theory and the language game of political science. All those who make this distinction – whichever content they give to it – are somehow working in the field of political theory, while those working in the field of political science don't make it because of their empirical conception of politics. So this distinction is meaningful for those who address the political domain from the perspective of political theory and political philosophy. We can even say that this distinction is the condition for addressing this domain in a philosophical and theoretical way.

**Oppelt:** You said that you don't prefer one dimension to the other. Yet there are some critics who say that you are essentializing conflicts, and as a consequence, prefer the ontological to the ontic level. What would you reply? And is this for you more a theoretical and less a practical problem?

**Mouffe:** I am definitely not essentializing conflicts. I can only guess that those critics are targeting my conviction of the ineradicability of antagonism. They must be arguing from a liberal rationalist perspective that asserts that there is no conflict that could not be solved through reason. This thinking doesn't accept that there are conflicts that cannot have a rational solution, i.e. antagonistic conflicts. This, of course, must be understood as an ontological thesis. It is a philosophical postulate and has nothing to do with an essentialization of conflict. What we assert is radical negativity – a negativity that can neither be overcome in the Marxist nor in the Hegelian form. Contrary to the liberal view, Marx argues that class conflict is an antagonistic conflict, it cannot be resolved rationally. But for Marx, this was the only form of antagonism. Moreover, he thought that it could be eliminated. So the consequence of this conception was the communist illusion of a reconciled society in which the dimension of the political would have been overcome. What I found interesting in Schmitt is that he didn't disagree with Marx about the class conflict as an antagonistic conflict. But for him, there were many other forms of antagonisms emerging from many other types of social relations. This is why antagonisms cannot be eradicated because in order to do so, you would have to erase social relations and ultimately society itself. In Schmitt's view, you might eradicate conflict as a class conflict, but it would only pop up in another area. On that point, I agree more with him than with Marx.

To develop philosophically the assertion about the ineradicability of antagonism, I have used the notion of the "constitutive outside". This term was originally proposed by Henry Staten to bring together Derrida's reflections about "différance", "supplement" or "trace". Staten showed that they all pointed out to the fact that the creation of an identity always implies the establishment of a difference and that the constitution of every form of objectivity or identity requires the presence of an "outside". For Derrida, the condition of possibility of any form of identity is also the condition of the impossibility of an identity that would not have an exterior. It is what is meant by his critique of the "metaphysics of presence". Freud says something similar with his notion of the unconscious which reveals that the full mastery of the subject is impossible. Those assumptions question two of the most central themes of modern philosophy: the full mastery of the subject and the possibility of a fully inclusive form of rationality. Those are, of course, ontological postulates.

In my work, I have been examining the consequences of the 'constitutive outside' for politics. When we are dealing with political identities, which are always collective identities, what is at stake is the creation of a 'we' and this requires the determination of a 'they'. Indeed, there is no 'we' without a 'they'. There is, of course, nothing necessarily

antagonistic in such a distinction 'we/they', and it doesn't need to be formulated in antagonistic terms as a friend-enemy relation. It can be a simple relation of difference, for example, between 'we', the Catholics and 'they', the Muslims. But in certain conditions – and here Schmitt is important again – this distinction can always become antagonistic. This happens when the two sides perceive each other as friends and enemies, that is to say, as soon as the 'they' is perceived as questioning the existence of the 'we'. So, to sum it up: If political relations are always 'we-they relations', there is always the possibility that these relations will become antagonistic. That's why you can't imagine a society where antagonism would have been eradicated because that would require the disappearance of collective identities. But this is not an essentialist thesis! Saying that there is an ineradicable conflict between the Catholics and the Protestants or between the German and the French, that would be an essentialization. But that is not at all what I say. We don't know where antagonisms are going to emerge, but there is always the possibility that they would emerge. It is, of course, an ontological thesis and people starting from a rationalist ontology would never accept it. I want to stress that ontological presuppositions are necessary for any kind of reflection, but they cannot be proven. For instance, I would never attempt to prove that my ontology is the right one and that Habermas's is wrong. From a post-foundationalist perspective, that would not make sense. What I would argue is that if you start from the approach that I am advocating you can understand phenomena that the other approach cannot grasp. I would, for example, argue that you can better understand the phenomenon of right-wing populism or the way in which conflicts erupt in societies.

**Oppelt:** Your references to "political identities" and the republican tradition suggest that it's the citizen who is the relevant actor in your conception. There are now some voices saying that with respect to your conception of radical negativity, there is a (maybe necessary) lack of a positive definition of the radical democratic citizen. Would you agree? Or are you really convinced that it is possible to identify with abstract principles like equality and liberty or with the contradiction between them? Is it possible to identify with a paradox? Is that necessary at all?

**Mouffe:** Let me first discuss how I envisage the agonistic struggle in order to answer that question. As you know, the agonistic struggle is different from the friend-enemy struggle, in which the opponents don't share any common symbolic space, in which they don't recognize the legitimacy of the claims of their opponents, and in which what they want is to eliminate their opponents. This is, of course, incompatible with a democratic society. An agonistic struggle requires something that I call a "conflictual consensus". There is an agreement that as citizens of a liberal democratic society we share a common symbolic space constituted by the ethico-political principles of liberty and equality for all. What makes this consensus a conflictual one is that when it comes to defining liberty and equality as well as who belongs to the 'all', there will be profound disagreements. The agonistic struggle takes place between neo-liberal, social-democratic, and radical-democratic interpretations of those principles. Radical democratic citizen act according to a radical democratic interpretation of liberty and equality for all, and those who identify with a radical democratic project want to see these principles applied to increasingly more social relations.

There is not one single interpretation of the common good that all citizens would have to accept. That doesn't mean that we don't need a reference to the common good, but this

common good is always contested. Lacan used to say “there is no meta-language [...] and nevertheless it is necessary”. I would say the same about the common good: There is no common good, and nevertheless, it is a necessary point of reference. The hegemonic struggle in this respect is the struggle about the interpretation of the common good. It is the struggle for the definition of the accepted view of the common good. But this accepted view is necessarily a hegemonic one. There will always be other interpretations of the common good that are discarded. And this is why (in terms of citizenship) there is not one way of acting as a citizen but rather a plurality of ways depending on how you interpret the principles of liberty and equality for all. This is where I see the connection to the tradition of civic republicanism. In this tradition, citizenship is not only a legal status, it’s a principle of action, and we need to re-introduce this dimension in our liberal societies. This principle of action will be guided by certain values and by a certain interpretation of the common good. This is what distinguishes a radical-democratic citizen from what we could, for instance, call a social-democratic citizen. The latter is less open to the demands of the new movements and prefers to fight for redistribution and economic rights. These are, of course, important things, but he or she would not be so sensitive to those demands that are not strictly economic and social. I don’t see what would be the problem in identifying with a specific conception of the common good, be it radical democratic, social-democratic or otherwise. We don’t identify with abstract principles. We identify with the implementations of those principles or with concrete questions such as the kind of policies and rights we want and for whom. Those are very concrete questions, so we are talking about identification with a project of society inscribed in a variety of practices, values and policies.

**Oppelt:** Your conception of citizenship as a principle of action that needs to be re-introduced in liberal societies alludes to the problem of “political apathy”, which currently is definitely one of the most alarming and challenging phenomena. So when it’s theoretically possible to imagine a radical democratic citizen, wouldn’t you see that there are at least some practical problems as soon as it comes to the attempt to implement this ideal? Don’t the requirements of a conception of radical democratic citizenship overcharge “ordinary” people, if you allow that term?

**Mouffe:** No, I don’t think so. Consider the situation when *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* came out in 1985. At that time, we were just at the beginning of the transition to neo-liberalism, and the book was still written under the hegemony of social democracy. Accordingly, the aim of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* was to argue that democratic and social rights are important, but that there are also other demands that we need to take into account – the demands of the New Social Movements. The main policies of social-democratic parties were not conducive to this. So at that time, we fought for an extension and radicalization of social-democratic policies. Today, the situation is much different because the rights that were established by social democratic policies and the welfare state have gradually been taken away. We are now in a situation in which we have to defend rights that we did not find radical enough some years ago. The neo-liberal hegemony has eroded economic and social rights. After 9/11, things got even worse because some civil rights have been under attack. The main motto now is “security”. It is presented as the main value, and in the name of this value, a lot of rights are simply left aside or eliminated. Today we are not in the position of offensively radicalizing democracy, but rather in a defensive position to defend existing rights that are threatened. We are in a time when no

one really expects big advances. In the post-democratic circumstances in which we are living, what we are facing is a process of 'de-democratization', so what we need is a 're-democratization'. This can be done in different ways and should not just mean going back to social-democracy. We should try to re-democratize and to radicalize at the same time. For some category of people, re-democratization is more important than for others because they have to defend what they have before they can fight for new advances.

**Oppelt:** But who is in fact the actor on demand now, who has to initiate this process of a re-democratization? Social movements? Political parties? Political theorists?

**Mouffe:** That question leads me to a point that I very much insist on in *Agonistics*. What we really need now is a synergy between political parties and social movements. The problem as I see it is that social movements (or a great majority of them) don't want to have anything to do with parties and political institutions. They believe that it's only through civil society that things can change. On the other side, you have the parties who insist that if you've got demands, you have to express them through traditional means of representation. The fundamental problem is that we are living in a post-political situation, which means that there is no real agonistic struggle between center-right and center-left. Left parties have moved to the center, and what they propose is to manage neo-liberal globalization in a more humane way. The hegemony of neo-liberalism led to the left parties to accept that there is no real alternative to neo-liberal globalization, so they are unable to give voice to a lot of democratic demands. As I said in *On the Political*, contrary to what people argue, the blurring of the line between left and right is not a sign of a more mature democracy, but is rather quite negative. The left-right distinction is important because it is the way in which the division of society can be put symbolically into scene. I would like to stress that by defending the left-right distinction, I am not implying the existence of some kind of essentialist content of left and right and their meaning change according to different contexts. However, it is possible to distinguish them by the way they order the principles of liberty and equality. Parties of the right tend to put liberty before equality while parties of the left tend to put equality first and liberty second. This struggle between left and right needs to find ways of being fought through democratic institutions which is not possible at the moment because of the 'consensus at the centre'. This is why we are facing a real crisis of representation. When the *Indignados* claim: "We do have a vote, but we don't have a voice", they are right. Indeed, we do not have a voice if we only have the possibility to choose between centre-left and centre-right, which is similar to the possibility of choosing between Pepsi-Cola and Coca-Cola. In those circumstances, how can you expect people to find the motivation to vote?

Consequently, there are increasingly more protests taking place outside the representative institutions. In my view the protest movements we are currently witnessing reveal that something is deeply wrong with the present state of representative democracy, and this is why in *Agonistics* I interpret them as a symptom of the lack of an agonistic debate. But I also argue that these protest movements are not – and will never be – able to transform the existing configuration of power and establish a new hegemony on their own. The future of democratic institutions depends on the possibility of establishing a synergy between parties and social movements. For that synergy to be possible, it is very urgent for the left parties to be able to offer an alternative to neo-liberalism. As long as people don't feel that there is an alternative, they will desert left parties. The mobilizations we are currently witnessing are important and necessary because they bring a lot of prob-

lems to the fore. All those who criticized the *Occupy* movement for not having or offering alternatives or solutions missed the point because this is not the role of a movement. They pose questions, and I think that they should make demands, but it's up to the parties to propose solutions. This is why they need to work together, and this is what I don't see very much of. I was recently in Hamburg for an all-day-workshop, where I spoke with fifteen PhD-students. They were saying that for their generation, it's 'uncool' to be in a political party. All of them were really politically interested, but none of them was in a party. I think that this is really a problem.

The *Indignados* of the M 15 in Spain are a typical example of such a situation. They demand "real democracy", but they don't want to have anything to do with any organization, party, or trade-unions. The result of their campaign for abstention was the defeat of the *Socialist Party* (SPOE). Many people who would have voted for the Socialists did not vote, and, as a result, the right-wing *Partido Popular* is now in power with an absolute majority. I can certainly understand their critiques of SPOE, but wouldn't it still be better to have the *Socialist Party* in power instead of the *Partido Popular*? The urgent task is to find ways to open parties to social movements and to make the movements open to parties. This is where political theorists might play a positive role. The last chapter of *Agonistics* suggests the kind of intervention that one can make as a political theorist. One can, for example, discuss whether the movements should really fight representative democracy in order to install some sort of "presentist democracy" or "horizontalist democracy". As a political theorist, I can point out the shortcomings of the ideal of horizontalist or presentist democracy and explain why democracy cannot exist without representation. I can argue that the problem today is not with representative democracy per se but with its actual form. I can show that representative democracy can only work when there is agonistic struggle and when there are real alternatives to choose from. If all parties offer more or less the same, that is not representative democracy at all.

**Oppelt:** Do we thus have to discern populism not as a danger but rather as a driving force for agonistic struggles and for the political life within democracies?

**Mouffe:** Yes, that's definitely true. I would even say that being populist should be seen as a political virtue! I am convinced that the only promising way to fight right-wing populism is by developing forms of left-wing populism. What right-wing populism did understand is the role of passion in politics – the role of common affects. The mobilization of passions explains the success of right-wing-populism. For a long time, right-wing populist movements were the only ones that tried to challenge the consensus at the center between the traditional democratic parties. In that sense, the current protest movements are promising because they can be seen as a first manifestation of a left-wing challenge to this consensus. But this is not enough, and those protests need to find forms of institutionalization. We need left-wing-populist parties which articulate this kind of demands politically. Take Greece as a really interesting example in Europe. *Syriza*, as a coalition of different parties under the leadership of Alexis Tsipras, succeeded in giving a political leadership to the different movements who in the beginning assembled in Syntagma Square. The different progressive demands coming from civil society are channelled through *Syriza*. *Syriza* doesn't reject representative democracy and aims to come to power through elections. But at the same time, it tries to offer an alternative to neo-liberalism. It is thus an interesting example of how social movements and parties can work together. And that's what is missing in Spain, for instance. Next to the M 15, there were popular mobilizations

as a reaction to the drastic austerity measures taken by the *Partido Popular*, but the movements there lack the kind of political leadership as we see it in Greece, and it is absolutely necessary in order to have a real impact.

To illustrate the kind of left-wing populism that I advocate, one could also take the example of the movement in France for which Jean-Luc Mélenchon was the candidate in the last presidential elections, the *Front de Gauche*. This is also a coalition of different left parties and in that sense, it is similar to Syriza, although at a smaller scale. Of course, the *Front de Gauche* is accused of being populist by the traditional parties as Syriza is. But in my view, this is where its strength lies because it really tries to create a popular movement. Mélenchon's mobilization of the youth in the 2012 presidential elections was remarkable. In the beginning, opinion polls only predicted four percent for the *Front de Gauche*. However, because Mélenchon is a very charismatic leader, he managed to mobilize many young people and they ended up with almost 12 percent. Particularly interesting is the fact that France was one of the very few countries where there was almost no *Occupy* movement. I think the explanation for this is that thanks to Mélenchon and the *Front de Gauche*, many young people felt that there was still the possibility to act and mobilize through representative politics. What he offered those young people, in contrast to other countries (where they would have tried to express their disaffection in *Occupy* camps or even through riots), was the feeling that there was a possibility to fight for change inside the system of representative democracy and its existing institutions. That shows us that if there are parties that offer alternatives, it's more likely that people get mobilized, although there will always be people that don't want to have to do anything with parties. I am convinced that there is a necessary populist dimension in democracy, because as power of the demos, democracy requires the construction of a collective will, a 'people'. However this people, this 'we', needs to be constructed politically, and this requires the determination of a 'they'. The crucial question always is: who is going to be the 'they'. For right-wing populism, it's usually the immigrants and particularly the Muslims, as in the case of Marine Le Pen. For Mélenchon, on the contrary, the 'they' are the big transnational corporations, financial powers, and all the other institutions that can be seen as cornerstones of neo-liberalism. For him, immigrants and Muslims are part of the 'we' – part of the people. This is the main difference between right-wing populism and left-wing populism.

**Oppelt:** You mentioned the need of democratic politics to win over young people. So let's talk about the role of the so-called new media as they are mainly used by young people all over the world. Now that we were witnessing 'Twitter revolutions' and 'Facebook revolutions' worldwide, would you still call the Internet 'irrelevant'? Would you insist on your former statement that the mobilization of people via Internet is no real social movement for you, maybe even no movement at all? At least you were using the term "autism" in this context?

**Mouffe:** I am not saying – and never said – that the Internet and the new media are irrelevant. In the very example of Obama's first campaign "moveon.org", they were very important in order to gain votes for Obama. But that was, of course, no real social movement because a real social movement doesn't exist only by sending e-mails. It must take the form of popular mobilization. If the energy yielded by "moveon.org" had been somehow institutionalized in form of demonstrations in order to put pressure on Obama, we could call this a social movement. A lot of people today unfortunately think that it is enough to

send an e-mail to be politically active, but there is a physical aspect of assemblies that mustn't be underestimated.

The Internet can be important in order to reach people, but for what kind of politics is that conducive? I think that this is the crucial issue and I fear that singing the praises of the Internet promotes a very problematic type of politics. Is this kind of mobilization really democratizing? The important question is how people come to organize themselves in order to be able to participate and change things. So, I think we should be careful celebrating the Internet as a further and important step towards more democracy because it can be used in positive as well as in negative ways.

**Oppelt:** Do you have a Facebook account?

**Mouffe:** No!

**Oppelt:** Do you know that there are two Facebook accounts named "Chantal Mouffe"?

**Mouffe:** I know that, but I don't even want to see them. I'm totally anti-Facebook! I understand that for some people the social networks might be attractive, but I find their impact on the blurring between the spheres of public and private really worrying. It could be a question of generation and age, but I believe that the great luxury today is to be 'incomunicado'.

**Oppelt:** How would you respond to those critics who call the theory of hegemony a "hegemonic great power" within the left that hides behind a minority pathos?

**Mouffe:** Really? [Laughs] Who says that? Well, I wish it was, but I honestly don't think so. In my view, Hardt and Negri's call for "exodus" – their strategy of "withdrawal from" institutions – is much more widespread at the moment. This is a view that doesn't want to be concerned with the state or with parties, and that advocates the self-organization of the multitude outside all kinds of institutions, and I find it very problematic. As I said before, our position, in contrast, is what I call a position of an "engagement with" or – following Gramsci – of a "war of positions". In order to change things, you need to engage with existing institutions; you need to launch a counter-hegemonic struggle. I am deeply convinced that it is much more conducive to developing an effective politics, but, unfortunately, I don't see where this position is dominant in the social movements.

**Oppelt:** Does radical democracy have a normative deficit?

**Mouffe:** Well, that's the old criticism of the Habermasians. I confess that I am not interested in the kind of normative political theory that dedicates itself to asserting how the world should be without wondering about how we could get there. When asked to answer that question, some of those theorists answer: "I am a political philosopher, that is not my problem, that's the politicians' problem". I prefer to start from a realist position, trying to understand how things are and how they work, in order to imagine if they can be transformed. I honestly find grand normative theories somehow useless. Of course, there is always a normative element present when one engages in a research, but it is different from aiming at elaborating a normative theory.

When I decide to examine a specific issue, my original motivation is always a political one. For instance, in the case of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* our aim was to understand the reasons for the incapacity of Marxism to grasp the nature of the new social movements and to put forward a project able to articulate a diversity of demands which

were not class-based. We argued that this incapacity was due to its class-essentialist ontology and to its economistic approach, which did not allow it to recognize that political subjects were discursively constructed. It is in order to overcome those limitations that we had recourse to post-structuralism. The arguments of the book were elaborated at two levels, political and theoretical, but the original impulse was a political one. I could say the same for all my posterior writings. The initial spark is always provided by a given political conjuncture. My critique of deliberative democracy, for instance, comes from my conviction that it is vital for democratic politics to acknowledge the role of affects in politics and not to abandon this terrain to the right. In *On the Political* I have shown how the crisis of the left today is due to a lack of understanding of the necessary 'partisan' nature of politics and a mistaken emphasis on consensus. I think that the rise of right-wing populist parties in Europe is linked to the fact that left parties were unable to offer alternatives to neo-liberal hegemony because they were searching for a 'consensus at the centre'. They have accepted the claim that there was no alternative to the current neo-liberal form of globalization and are only trying to manage it in a 'more humane' way.

**Oppelt:** So taking part in this 'war of positions', what would you say are the most pestering challenges to be met for somebody who is committed to the radical democratic project today?

**Mouffe:** I think the most important task today is to develop a counter-hegemonic offensive to challenge neo-liberalism and to work towards developing a left-wing-populism. There are many different ways to do it, of being what Gramsci calls an "organic intellectual", and how you can contribute to that task depends on who you are. Artists and cultural workers have an important role to play in creating a new common sense. If you are an economist, you can elaborate an alternative to neo-liberalism in terms of economic institutions. As a political theorist, you can examine the reason for the crisis of representative democracy and imagine ways in which representative democracy can be transformed and made more open to the demands of the new movements. It is urgent to find ways to bring together the civil society movements and the political parties. If this synergy is not established – if there is no way to channel the growing social movements and no possibility for them to be expressed through institutions – the energy found in those movements will get lost, as is the case with the *Occupy* movements. You can't maintain this energy for a long time; there is always a certain point at which it needs to be institutionalized. In my view, the development of left-wing populist parties should provide spaces for the institutionalization of those movements. In this respect, I find the recent text of *Die Linke, Verankern, verbreiten, verbinden*, where they put forward their project for the development of the party in terms of a 'Verbindende Partei' with links to social movements, NGO, trade-unions and as active in a multiplicity of struggles very interesting and really promising.